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# Antoine de Saint-Exupéry



"A strange human being, exceptional and wonderful, a prince, a generous prince, aloof, lost among us."  
*(Captain G. Courtain)*



## "Where do I come from? I come from my childhood..."

Nineteen hundred. The expectations of a new century, intact, yet to be given shape, rose together with the curtain of a new life. What would become of this century? What would be become of this child born with the century? Maybe someone put anxiously that question to Mr. and Mrs. de Saint-Exupéry on that 29th of June 1900 in Lyon. Antoine had just entered History.

"It is by chance that I was born in Lyon", Antoine would say later. It was true in a certain sense. His mother was born in Provence, his father in Limousin. Chance had brought them together in Lyon, where he used to work as a insurance broker. His father belonged to an old aristocratic family, and he kept still his count title and prestige of a name thought to go as far back as the fifth century.

Antoine knew his father only through photos. In fact, Jean de Saint-Exupéry died in 1904, leaving behind a widow and five sons of short age. The oldest was seven, the youngest one.

Antoine's mother, bending under sorrow and difficulties, takes the decision to join her aunt, Madame de Tricaud, who has a castle in Saint-Maurice de Rémons.

There, in a fairy tale like atmosphere, Antoine spends the happiest days of his life. The old castle is surrounded by a huge park full with trees, and his luxuriant fantasy makes an enchanted castle out of it. Games without end in the park. On rainy days the children lose themselves in the long alleyways looking for the treasures.

At that time everybody fancies calling him Antoine "the King Sun": King, because he reigns over this marvelous world; Sun, because his blond, golden hair reminds them of the sun.

Saint-Maurice de Remens means sweet years spend next to a loving and understanding mother who entertains her children with fairy tales and piano playing. It means, too, Paula, the Austrian tutoress, whom Antoine remembers, as a grown-up with tenderness: "My oldest recollections? I had a tutoress from Tirol, her name was Paula. But this is not a recollection. She was already a legend when I was five years old, in the entrance hall..."

She is above all the symbol of the old stove which used to heat Antoine's room, and watch his sleep over at night. The memory of this stove will remain engraved in his mind: "The best thing, the most placid, and the friendliest which I have ever known is the little stove from upstairs in Saint-Maurice. Nothing else ever in my existence made me feel so secure. I woke up at night to listen to its humming top like noise and watch its agile shadows on the wall. I do not know why, but it made me think of a faithful water spaniel. The stove protected us against everything... Never ever have I had a friend like that stove." (Letter to his mother. Buenos Aires 1939)

Five years have gone by. Antoine is just nine. Madame de Saint-Exupéry decides to leave Saint-Maurice and settle down anew in Le Mans with her sons. There they will receive a good education. Antoine and Francois go to Our Lady of the Holy Cross's school. Antoine is not what one might call an industrious student. His fellow

student Gauthier says of him: "He was a boy with a round face and a nose shaped like a stew-pot's leg, and who smiled with an intractable air about him. His hair was disorderly and he wore his collar and neck-tie in a crooked way, in short, he was the inattentive student who, like many others, had his fingers full with ink."

Disorderly about himself, but, above all, disorderly about his things. Punishments are now abundant. Antoine discovers discipline and experiences the first sorrows. Luckily he finds in his mother an "almighty" support. As a grown-up he will remember that sweet and sour time: "When I was a young boy I used to cry on the way back from school with my rucksack on my back, because I had been punished (remember Le Mans?), but a single kiss was enough to make me forget everything. You were an almighty support against supervisors and prefects. I felt secure in your home..." (Letter to his mother, Buenos Aires 1939.)

Undoubtedly Madame de Saint-Exupéry had a great influence on her sons and on Antoine in particular. She was an exceptional human being, singularly gifted for painting, writing and music. She initiated her children, as from earliest age, to the contemplation of a picture, to the reading of a good book, to the understanding of a beautiful melody through body and soul... It can be said that Antoine's childhood turned around two poles: Saint-Maurice de Rémons and his mother.

## An unsettled youth

Antoine is on the difficult step from childhood to youth when the first world war sets in. It is the start of a period of instability which has its repercussions on Antoine's personality, yet to be given shape, and on his studies too.

Madame de Saint-Exupéry works as a sister at Amberieux's hospital and sends Francois and Antoine to a Jesuits' school in Villefranche. They do not succeed in adapting themselves to the strict discipline, and three months later join the school of Saint John in Fribourg, Switzerland. The balance of the three months at the Jesuits is rather negative: a new nickname, "Pique la lune", a cruel allusion to a turned-up nose... The name Antoine was out of fashion.

The new atmosphere and peaceful surroundings in Fribourg do not contribute to give a new impulse to Antoine's studying. Now, more than ever, he indulges in reveries and dedicates the whole of his time to reading and writing poetry: "At the age of sixteen", he would say later, "I discovered the poets; it goes without saying that I was convinced that I was a poet, too, and for two years I wrote poetry, proudly, like all other youths".

But soon Antoine has to go back to reality... a harsh reality. His brother Francois who suffers from heart rheumatism, dies in July. The death of his brother impresses him very deeply. But life continues... he takes several higher level examinations, prior to University, and is successful in 1917.

## The difficult years

The moment to take a decision has come. He prepares himself for a competitive examination in order to be admitted to the Naval School. In two years of studies at the Bossuet School. But he goes on indulging in reveries, also he is little inclined to obey the square structures of discipline two years become three and he fails the final examination, prior to admission to the School. Nevertheless, during this span of time, his ideas have ripened gradually and his interest for astrology and literature has grown bigger. His friends are amazed at his way of life, but, in a certain sense, they envy him: "What a guy! - recalls Renee de Saussine, closely acquainted with Antoine-, he lives on coffee only, so that he can buy himself a sextant. He writes short stories during his studies. One day he will be famous". Nevertheless, he is still as shy and untractable as before. Henri de Ségogne, who studied with him, makes the following description: "A shy youth, wild, inclined to sudden changes of mood, at one time full of energy and life, at another, taciturn, shut up seemingly in anger, all of it a clue to his musing activity. He was little sociable, and that made him suffer, because he wanted to be loved."

So then, three years of studying did not lead him anywhere real... Antoine felt that there were no chances of joining the Naval School, and all his illusions faded away at once. Moreover, fate turned against him... gone over the age limit.

Then he registered at the School of Art, Department of Architecture. This is the time when he used to go out in a group. This is the time of the long talks in the cafes of the Latin Quarter, but also of insoluble money problems. This is the time when he used to live in a tiny room in the Louisiana Hotel and, in short, the time of unexciting humdrum. Although he liked drawing, Antoine was not satisfied with the studies he had just undertaken and when, at last, on the 2nd of April 1921, he was called up for military service in the Second Regiment of the Aircraft Forces -he himself had made all efforts to join the soonest possible-, Antoine thought relieved that this time he had indeed found his true way: aviation.

" You shall see when I take off on my plane..."

His interest in aircrafts soon changed into passion, a passion which he had in him for several years. It all started in Saint-Maurice de Rémens during a summer holiday. Near the castle there was an aircraft field which he subrepticiously used to approach in order to watch the comings and goings of pilots and mechanics. Antoine quickly became fond of all these people, completely dedicated to make perfect this newly-born means of transport. From the beginning he liked the atmosphere of comradeship and brotherhood which reigned among them. Soon they became acquainted with each other and one day a miracle happened: a well known pilot, Vedrines, puzzled by the eagerness of the young boy, suggested an excursion by plane. That very day of the year 1912 Antoine gave shape to the emotions he had felt during his first trip in the air. Only these three verses remain:

"Les ailes frémissaient sous le souffle du soir  
Le moteur de son chant berçait l'dme endormie  
Le soleil nous frdlait de sa couleur pdlie."

Antoine had just discovered that he too, had the soul of a pilot. He changed his bicycle into an airplane by fitting to it two wings he had made out of a bedsheet, and after taking seat on his machine he exclaimed proudly: "You shall see when I take off on my plane. The crowd will shout: Hurrah Antoine de Saint-Exupéry!"

Many years went by. Antoine was about to be twenty-one when the Second Regiment of the Aircraft Forces in Strasbourg called him up to military service.

Soon he was disillusioned: they did not admit him among the flying personnel; instead he was assigned to the landing services as an assistant. His desire to fly was not going to be fulfilled this time either. Antoine felt down and, as usual, he disclosed his grief to his mother: "At night I feel a little sadness. You ought to come here, to Strasbourg, some day. I am somewhat choking in this atmosphere. I have no prospects. I need to occupy myself with something that I like." (Letter to his mother, Strasbourg 1921.)

But now he had found his way and had made the decision to be successful by all means: "Mum" he goes on, "if you only knew how irresistible is my desire to fly! if I do not attain my aim, I shall be very unhappy.., but I shall attain it."

And he was successful. He took private coaching from a civil monitor, and a few months later he had a civil pilot's diploma. That had not been easy at all. The coaching was expensive and the money from the grant was not enough. So he had to resort all the time to his mother's generosity. This explains why his being impatient, which almost cost him his life and which made Commander Garde utter the sentence: "Saint-Exupéry, you shall never kill yourself in an airplane accident, otherwise you would have done so already."

As Antoine wants to become a military pilot, he is sent to Rabat where he will undergo the necessary instruction. Six months later he obtains the diploma, and with it the rank of second lieutenant. His destination is the 33rd Aircraft Regiment at Le Bourget in Paris.

But Antoine is not favored by fortune's privileges. When everything seemed to be going well -his profession, his girl friend, good prospects-, a new accident interrupts his bliss. His future stepfather asks him to resign. Again he is without a job and morally very affected.

### Long embittered months

Shortly after recovering from his broken bones, he finds a job as supervisor in a tile factory. But Antoine is not made for counting tiles. He feels that he is a prisoner of figures... endless columns of figures like prison bars, and a prisoner of his four-walled office.

"What a pitiful object I must be... But I do not have a single friend who might show sympathy towards me... Chum, my situation is despicable. I yawn in an office of two meters long by two meters wide and look out of the window at the rain falling on the court-yard. I also make sums. And I sort out files, too, as told... Life is very sad. I should like to change office. I have been doing the same thing too long a time. I am the most dispirited guy in the world. " (Paris 1923)

His life is divided between the office and the unpretending guest-house where he lives. "Life is sad in this shabby little hotel in the Ornano boulevard, 70 his... Is not very funny." (Letter to his mother, Paris 1923.)

One of his sources of joy is the airplane. During his free time he pilots an airplane. When his finances allow him to... Then his enthusiasm has no limits: "...On Sunday I went for a spin on an airplane. I had a good flight. Mum, I adore this occupation. You cannot imagine the calm-ness and solitude one finds at 4.000 meters of altitude, alone with the engine." (Letter to his mother, Paris 1923.)

Aside from the airplane, friends are also a good part of his life during that period of depression. Often he is invited to parties. Also he goes out in a group to the theatre, for a drink... Antoine feels that he is understood and supported: "Mum, I have a new joy in my life. I have the best friends you can imagine. At the moment they

go through an epidemic of liking me. (Letter to his mother, Paris 1924.)

But since his girlfriend suddenly left him -some thought that her family did not like him, others thought that he preferred airplanes to her-, he has more supply of love than ever, and marriage seems to him the ideal solution: "...I feel like getting married, not very much though... but I do not know whom to. Moreover I have provisions of fatherly love. I should like to have lots of little Antoinettes..." (Letter to his mother, Paris 1924.)

At the end of 1924 he changes job. He becomes a representative of Saurer lorries. He is in charge of three departments, and spends his time travelling all over the place. But he does not excel either in his new job: in fifteen months he only manages to sell one single lorry.

But Paris continues to be his headquarters more than ever, and, in Paris, the house of a distant relative, Ivonne de Lestranges, a learned lady who entertains in her saloons well known writers like Gide, Gallimard, later Antoine's publisher... and there Antoine happens to meet Jean Prevost, secretary of the magazine "Navire d'argent", who suggests to the possibility of writing something. One day, Antoine timidly hands him a few pages that he has written during his free time, following his advice. The response is neither a letter nor a few words, but the publishing of few pages in that magazine, in the April number of 1926. It is his short story. The Pilot surprises all and everyone that surround him have known him for a long time. The Pilot is through and through autobiographical. It tells the story of a flying monitor who, like Antoine, has depressions whenever he leaves his airplane. It is an interesting story as the airplane is the central character of it. Until then the -been unedited. The Pilot is like a revelation to Saint-Exupéry... flies he shall be able to write.

The success of his first literary composition coincides with his the airline company Latecoere.

### "Saint-Ex", civil pilot

Father Sudour, former teacher at the Bossuet school, liked Antoine very much, and so he recommended him to Beppo de Massimi, manager of the airline company Latécoère, born out of a project, both ambitious -bring into being a commercial company able to cross the seas-and social -make contacts easier between nations-. It was the result of the willpower of three men: Massimi, Didier Daurat, two experienced pilots, and Pierre Latecoere, engineer and aircraft builder in his own factory. In 1919 took place the first civil flight between Toulouse and Rabat. Nothing could stop them toward the goal that they had set themselves... to reach Dakar and afterwards South America, covering a total distance of 12.400 kilometres.

When Saint-Exupéry first meets Beppo de Massimi, in 1926, civil flights have increased and they reach Dakar already. Flying conditions are still very tough, so that the pilots are required to be very much aware of their duty and responsibility. In fact, the flights have to be operated daily, all the time. Nothing should stop a pilot.

Saint-Exupéry is prepared to do anything in order to be able to fly, and so he applies for a post as a pilot. Soon after he is ordered to present himself to Didier Daurat in Toulouse, Chief Manager of the Civil airlines Toulouse-Dakar. From this interview Daurat kept the memory of "a man with a mellow voice, unassuming air about him and an earnest face. As the conversation went on and became more lively, his replies to my questions revealed a young man gifted with a true pilot's nature, and also with that of an inventor of fertile imagination".

Saint-Exupéry had just been successful on the acid test. Indeed, Daurat was larger than life. Everybody feared him, from the humblest mechanic to the oldest pilot. Also his task was a difficult one: to attend to the good running of the airline. He was severe with himself and with others. He could not accept the slightest mistake or weakness of the mechanics or the pilots. He was known as an insensitive and unyielding man. As a matter of fact Saint-Exupéry took his inspiration from Daurat in order to give shape, later, to the main character in Night Flight.

The first thing Daurat did with Saint-Exupéry was to send him for a to the repair workshops. It was like an entrance examination which Daurat imposed on every one who wanted to join his factory... "in order to take off them the mask of pride that they wear". Many a one took it as punishment and left after a few days. Of course, it was not Daurat's job. He only wanted them to be aware of the requirements of the They all, mechanics and pilots, worked for the same cause and needed each other.

From the very first moment he was enthusiastic about the atmosphere comradeship which existed among them. After a few months he was allowed to undergo a pilot's rest. Everything went all right. A few days later he took off on his first mail flight: Toulouse-Rabat. Later he was assigned to the Dakar-Casablanca area.

At last Saint-Exupéry felt himself fulfilled. From Dakar, in 1926, he wrote to his mother: "I am all right and I am happy." (Letter to his mother, Dakar 1926.)

Each take-off was like a new adventure. How would the airplane react this time? What was the weather going to be like, up there? Aircrafts were quite different from the ones Saint-Exupéry had known a few years earlier.

The matter of the fact is that he realized that the danger was greater than originally thought, when he had to

fly from Dakar to Casablanca 2.765 kilometers across African territory, where dissident tribes watched the sky, ready to open fire on any plane in sight. The danger existed also of having an accident in the desert, and so be caught by the rebels and have his throat cut.

Saint-Exupéry, or "Saint-Ex" for his team friends, had been civil pilot for a year when Didier Daurat decided to appoint him chief director of the airbase in Cape Juby. It was on the 19 of October 1927.

### **Eighteen months in the silence of the desert**

Cape Juby was right in the middle of the dissident zone, in Rio de Oro, a stopping-place between Casablanca and Dakar which belonged to the Spaniards. They had built a fortress where the governor, Colonel de la Pefla, lived permanently with a battalion of soldiers and some officers. From time to time they would go out on inspection in the Sahara. They did not want the French pilots to have a landing base in Cape Juby, though they allowed the pilots to land in order to fill the tanks. If a pilot happened to fall, with the aircraft, in the dissident zone, he knew that he could not expect any help from the Spaniards, who had been ordered not to intervene by the Madrid government.

Under such conditions, Didier Daurat took the decision to send someone to Cape Juby, someone able to rescue the pilots fallen in the desert in order to ease the good running of the mail flights. Several pilots had had their throats cut. Therefore, Daurat was in need of a man able to use tact and diplomacy on Colonel de la Pefla, and obtain permission from him for the setting up of an airfield. At the same time, he had to be a brave man, on stand by day and night, ready to fly out on rescue of any aircraft fallen in the desert. Nobody seemed more appropriate for this mission than Saint-Exupéry.

And here is Antoine, surrounded by a fence of barbed wire, the sea on one side and the desert on the other. Later he shall complain to his mother about this feeling of seclusion: "What a life... like a monk, in Africa's most forsaken spot, in the middle of the Spanish Sahara. A fortress by the sea and our rustic dwelling, that is all in hundreds of kilometers around... The sea, at ebb tide, bathes us completely and, at night, I lean my elbows on the small barred window (we are in the dissident zone) and I can discern the sea by my feet, as near as if I were on a boat. Throughout the night the waves hit the walls of my barrack. The other wall is set toward the desert... "And he goes on: "I live in total deprivation. My bed consists of a board and a thin mattress. A wash basin. A jar of water. I forget other details..., the typewriter and some official papers. It is like a monastery cell. The aircrafts land here every eight days. In between these days silence..." (Letter to his mother. Cape Juby 1927.)

In order to overcome this deadly boredom, which may take possession of a man under such conditions, Saint-Exupéry establishes ties with the Spaniards and soon wins them over with his games of cards and his telepathy demonstrations. He gains their confidence and the barrack that he shares with Toto -basically a mechanic but also a cook during his free time- is full of voices, songs and parties.

He also makes friends with some Arab children who maraud by the barracks, and gradually acquires renown of being a good man, different from others. He is invited to tea in their tents. In exchange, Saint-Ex takes them on the aircraft. He treats them as equals, for the crux of the matter is, as he would later write in his *Wind, sand and stars*, "to calm down their pride which is the main reason why they kill the prisoners, more than for reasons of hatred. They were not ignorant of the fact that some of them saw the Arabs as a crowd full of indifference and disdain, and this moved the Arabs to be vindictive".

Now he has a few Arabs on which he can count, and their help shall be very useful when the moment comes to rescue a pilot fallen in the desert. This happens quite often. Then Saint-Exupéry has to inspect the desert until he finds him. When the accident is of little importance the aircraft can be repaired quickly. It has to be done in a hurry because the rebellious Arabs keep watch. Sometimes the risks are high... "Looking for two airplanes lost in the desert I covered 8.000 kilometers in two days. More than three hundred men pursued me, shooting at me as if I were a rabbit. There have been moments of fear, four times I landed on dissident's territory, even I had to spend the night there because of an accident... On such trips my skin, offered with the greatest generosity, is at stake." (Cape Juby 1928)

But the situation in the desert is not always as effervescent, and at times all live in complete harmony at Cape Juby. At night, Saint-Exupéry writes a new book. A board placed on two barrels is the desk on works. As he goes on putting together his book, he reads it aloud to his best friends, during the short spans of time that they spend with him, before taking off again. When it takes definite shape, he calls it *Southern Mail*. Why this title? According to Pierre Chevrier, Saint-Exupéry was looking for a title when "he happened to see the designation of the flight to Dakar, *Southern Mail*". And so he gave this title to his book in which he expands on the theme of *The Pilot* published two years before.

Eighteen months in Cape Juby and his mission was more than accomplished. When he starts his new assignment, he is awarded the Cross of Chevalier of the Legion of Honour for the following reasons:

"Exceptional virtues, a pilot of great boldness, gifted with the best professional qualities, cold blooded to the utmost, and an exceptional sense of self-denial. As airfield commander at Cape Juby, he fulfilled his mission with a sense of sacrifice beyond compare, in a desert area where the hostility of the Arabs is a permanent risk. He has to his credit several brilliant actions. His zeal, dedication and self-denial have largely served the cause of the French aviation. He has never hesitated in risking his life or suffering the rigorous climatic conditions. He has also contributed to the success of our commercial airlines, and, in particular, made the development of the Toulouse-Dakar line easier."

### One year in the land "where the stones fly"

Didier Daurat thought the presence of Saint-Exupéry more important in South America when he appointed him, in October 1929, chief manager of the company "Aeroposta-Argentina". His task was to set up new branches along the Latin American coast, and so he was put in charge of supervising the last stage of the future route Natal-Punta Arenas. He had to open up new ways in the Comodoro Rivadavia and Punta Arenas areas.

But he is not altogether satisfied with his new job. He writes to his mother: "I have been appointed chief manager for the development of the Aeroposta Argentina, a branch of the main airline company, with a salary of 225.000 francs a year. I assume that this makes you happy; I am a little sad. I liked it the way I had it before. I think that I feel older. Of course, I shall continue flying, but only in order to inspect and supervise new routes..." (Buenos Aires, 1930.)

This feeling of weariness is clearly felt in a letter to his friend Rinette: "I have under my command a network of three thousand eight hundred kilometers which little by little sucks out of me the rest of you th and freedom which are still in me." (Letter to Renee de Saussine, Buenos Aires 1930.)

He lives in Buenos Aires for a month, a city that he hates. The change is complete, the huge sand plains have been replaced by blocks of very high buildings where there are masses of people. In the same letter to Rinette, he adds: "I live in a small flat in a fifteen storey building, seven above and seven below me, surrounded by an enormous concrete city! I think, I would feel the same nimbleness in the middle of a great Pyramid."

He uses to spend most of the time in the airplane, on the lookout for new airfields, sometimes fighting against the strong winds from the Patagonia. On his arrival in Buenos Aires he had met with his old friends again, from the Toulouse-Dakar route, Mermoz and Guillaumet among others. Saint-Exupéry felt true admiration for them. He had known Mermoz, the pilot, the pioneer, since he first started flying, and when the route Casablanca-Dakar was inaugurated, the same Mermoz was one of the main pioneers. Later on he was sent as chief-pilot of South American routes and was entrusted with the establishment of a new commercial route. When the idea of night flights first appeared, Mermoz was one of the first to turn it into reality. As Saint-Exupéry explains later in *Wind, sand and stars*, "Mermoz undertook such engagements not knowing anything about it, not knowing whether he was going to come out alive of such struggles or not. Mermoz experimented for the others."

Saint-Exupéry also liked Guillaumet very much. He remembered how Guillaumet had cheered him up on the wake of his first flight Toulouse-Rabat. Guillaumet, the good companion, would get lost later on the Andes when Saint-Exupéry was chief of the Aeroposta. For five days they searched the area although they had been warned by Indians from the Andes that "the Andes mountains, in winter, do not return the men". All hope seemed lost but after eight days they were told that Guillaumet was alive. Later he would say that lapidary sentence: "I can assure you that I had to struggle more than an animal." Indeed he had had to fight against mountains, snow and hunger. In the end his face had changed completely. "It was black, swollen like an overripened fruit that everybody had hit. His hands were slow and, in order to speak, he had to sit on the edge of the bed and keep his feet dangling like a dead weight." This is what Saint-Exupéry wrote in *Wind, sand and stars*, a book dedicated to Guillaumet. He used to say of him... "he sheds confidence like a lamp sheds light."

Throughout that South American year Saint-Exupéry worked a lot at writing his second book, *Night Flight*, which was going to be a fabulous success. Its leit-motive, night flights, was then very much in fashion. It is all about the self denial of the pilots, and the inner conflicts of the chief manager of an airport whose duty is to be above his private needs. Andre Gide wrote the introduction, and the book won the Femina Prize in December 1931. This way Saint-Exupéry became the most appraised man of his time... the well-known pilot started also as a great writer.

But his friends turned their backs on him, contrary to the public, who praised his book. His friends reproached him for having diverged from the truth about the work of the pilots, the dramatic character of their night flights, in short, they reproached him for having disfigured reality.

Strictly speaking, Saint-Exupéry would not write books again, and his *Night Flight* would become a

nightmare for him. "Because I have written this book", he writes to Guillaumet in 1932, "my friends have sentenced me to a life of misery and unfriendliness. Mermoz will tell you about the reputation they have created around me those who do not want to see me any more, those that I loved so much".

That year, 1931, would be full of events. In April, Saint-Exupéry marries Consuelo Suncin, widow of the Argentinian journalist Gomez Carrillo. The same year, the Airline company and its branch, the Aeroposta Argentina, showed signs of disaster. The banks stopped (their credits and Saint-Exupéry was dismissed).

### Start from scratch

Without a job, Saint-Exupéry was obliged to accept a post as a simple pilot. After many years he was doing the night flight Casablanca-Dakar again.

Meanwhile time was up for the Airline Company, and also for Didier Daurat, who was going to be substituted. A few months later, Pierre Cot, new civil airways minister amalgamated all the private air companies in one, and so was formed "Air France". That was a hard blow for everyone. Aeroposta was the end of the spirit of solidarity and closeness.

Aimless again, Saint-Exupéry finds a job as a trial pilot at the Latecoere company, aircraft and seaplane constructor. His job lacks interest and Saint-Exupéry becomes listless in such an atmosphere: "I have just gone back to the seaplane centre - he writes to a friend of his-, where I did some trials. My ears still drone and my hands are full of grease. Jam drinking alone on a terrace of a little café and night is falling. I don't feel like going to supper... I spend my days by a pond which is neither a sea nor a lake. It is a mere lifeless surface which I do not like." (Perpignan, 1932.)

On the other hand, Saint-Exupéry is not a brilliant trial pilot. He makes unforgivable mistakes. The last one almost kills him. He is compelled to resign.

Back in Paris, he is bored stiff. Moreover his financial situation is precarious.

Since there is no better choice, and in order to escape inactivity, in 1934 he accepts a job in the advertising department of Air France. He travels on missions in France and abroad. After a trip to Saigon, he is sent to Moscow in May 1935 with the task to write several articles for the newspaper "Paris-Soir".

He writes five articles altogether, and they are a great success. The opposite happens with his film Anne-Marie. He had written the script before but the film was only partly successful.

Nevertheless his finances have improved in the last few months, so much so that he buys himself an airplane, the "Simoun", then the fastest airplane.

### The fascination of risk

Saint-Exupéry had several projects in view when he bought the "Simoun". One of them was to beat the speed record between Paris and Saigon held by Japy.

Around this time he has a frightening adventure in the desert. The date is the 29th of December 1935. Saint-Exupéry and his mechanic Prevot spend five days in the desert dying of thirst and continually suffering from mirages until they are rescued by the Bedouins. In a letter to his mother he explains how he felt: "Separation from humanity and silence made me furious, and I called you, mother. It is terrible to leave behind a human being that needs you, like Consuelo. You feel, then, the irresistible desire to go back and protect her, support her. You feel like rooting out your fingernails against the sand because you cannot fulfil your duty. You even feel like lifting mountains." This event was present in his mind when he wrote *The Little Prince*.

Despite all Saint-Exupéry had not lost courage. Risk had exerted a secret fascination on him, it pulled at him irremissibly, as it so happened two years later. Meanwhile he carried on with journalism.

By that time Spain was the main feature in all newspapers. A newspaper, the "Intransigeant", decides to send Saint-Exupéry to Barcelona with the task of writing about the civil war. Under the heading Spain in blood he described atrocious scenes he had witnessed. He reported bitterly: "Shooting people here is a daily exercise. In Spain there are crowds ~' movement, but the individual, this universe, in vain, cries out for help from the bottom of the well."

Several years had gone by since his failure in the Paris-Saigon race, 'so he was ready for the second race, this time between New York and Tierra del Fuego. But certainly this time luck was not going to be with him. As he was taking off in Guatemala, where he had had a technical stop, the aircraft did not respond and the tragedy occurred. It was the serious accident he had ever had. Saint-Exupéry had a broken skull his left shoulder was almost shattered. His condition was alarming he was taken to New York. He was in coma for several days. It took months for him to recover, and he would never completely recover from his broken bones.

These long months of sedentary life allowed him to write a new book, *Wind, sand and stars*. It is a chain of memories, experiences and thoughts, all of which take place in a time span covering ten years of his life as a

pilot.

In May 1939 the jury of the Academy awarded him the "Gran Prix". Four months later the second world war broke out.

## War pilot

Saint-Exupéry is mobilized at once, promoted to captain and assigned as a reserve officer in the Air Force at Toulouse. But the doctor's report was adamant... his age, thirty nine, and his half-paralyzed shoulder rendered him incapable of fulfilling any war mission. Such a verdict was like a death sentence to Saint-Exupéry. He felt himself relegated to the rank of "intellectuals in reserve, like jam jars on the shelves of an advertising firm, to be eaten up after the war."

Therefore he took all sorts of steps in order to have his assignment changed. He pestered all and everybody who could put in a word for him, pledging that "I have plenty to say about the events. I can talk about them as a soldier and not as a tourist. It is the only chance that I have to speak."

In the end, the reasonings that General Davet presented to the authorities were decisive... "what matters in the air force is not the physical heart but heart high and dry." The 3rd of November 1939 he was assigned to the reconnoitring squad 2/33, in Orconte, in the province of Champagne.

"Orconte -he would write in *Flight to Arras*-, is a small village near Saint-Dizier, where my group took quarters in the winter of 1939, a very bitter winter. I used to live in a barn made of bricks dried in the sun. At night the temperature was low enough to freeze the water in my rustic pitcher. Therefore the first thing I used to do when I got up, was to light the fire, although I had to jump out of a warm and cozy bed, where I was curled up in true delectation. Nothing seemed to me more delightful than this simple, monastic bed in that empty, cold room. After a hard day's work I enjoyed the blessedness of rest."

The reconnoitering missions at eight or ten thousand meters or at very low levels, when airplanes represented perfect targets, were a daily exercise. Saint-Exupéry would experience, more than ever, how perfect a target they were in a mission to Arras. Later he would describe it in *Flight to Arras*.

Shortly after this, as Saint-Exupéry had been suspecting so much, on the 22nd of June 1940, France signed the Armistice, admitting her defeat. Saint-Exupéry felt deeply wounded and did not stop until he was granted a visa for America.

Nevertheless, he had doubts until the time of his departure: his duty told him to go to America in order to explain to the Americans France's dramatic situation, but he also felt remorse at abandoning his fatherland.

On the ship to New York he was told about the death of Guillaumet, his best friend. He wrote "Guillaumet is dead. Tonight I feel that I am left without friends. I don't pity him. I have never pitied dead people. But I am going to need such a long time to realize his disappearance, and I am so weary of this horrible job... This is going to last for months. I shall be needing him so often. Does one grow old so quickly? I am the only one left of the Casablanca-Dakar team... Everyone else is dead and there is no one alive with whom I can share my memories. Here am I old, toothless and alone, pondering about all this on my own. In South America there is not a single one left either... there is not a single person left in the world to whom I can say: Do you remember how perfect it was in the desert? I thought that only the very old would survive to all their friends, to all of them."

## In exile

In January 1941 he took the last floor in a building in Central Park South, and there he spent long hours writing. His publishers asked him to write a book about the war called *Flight to Arras*, in which he expressed his opinions and approach to the war. The book was published simultaneously in France and America in 1942. The Germans quickly forbid its distribution in France. In America the book was read by a large number of the population. Pierre Lanux would say about it: "In my opinion, *Flight to Arras* represents the most efficient aid rendered to the French cause in American territory."

During his two years in New York he writes *Letter to a hostage*, a moving document used as an introduction to a book written by the journalist Léon Werth, a close friend of Saint-Exupéry, in the occupied area of France at the time. The letter is dedicated to the forty million Frenchmen, hostages of the Germans. It was published in February 1943. Two months later *The Little Prince* came out.

## The Little Prince

In the whole of Saint-Exupéry's literary production one cannot imagine a book like this. At first glance it seems an unusual book which bears no relation at all to the preceding books. It takes the shape of a poetical short story in which the animals speak... For some, it was quite unthinkable that a man of action and a hero at

the same time, could, all of a sudden, write books for children. For others it was something incomprehensible, something, even lacking of seriousness, to be rejected if not condemned. So, when *The Little Prince* was published, the public gave it a cold reception.

Nevertheless *The Little Prince* is the book which shows best who Antoine de Saint-Exupéry was, a book which contains all his philosophy.

The idea to write this short story for children was not his. It was a happy coincidence and there is a story to it.

Those who knew Saint-Exupéry describe him as continually drawing children wherever he happened to be, on his letters, on serviettes, on restaurant menus, on any piece of paper that he could lay his hands. One day, his American publisher Curtice Hitchcock asked him what he was drawing. The answer came simple and surprising: "Nothing much, it is the child in my heart." The publisher took the opportunity to ask him: "Why don't you write the story of this child into a children's book?" And so *The Little Prince* was born.

As the book was meant for children, it needed drawings. But soon he was convinced that he would have to do them himself since professional illustrators were unable to produce the simplicity and candour that he demanded for his short story.

*The Little Prince* seems to be an easier and simpler book than all the others published until then but, in fact, at the same time, it is the most profound.

On the surface it is a short story for children, but in reality it is a story of a child written for grown-ups or, if one so wishes, a going back, a return to childhood, "that huge territory that is our origin." "All grownups were first children, but few of them remember it", thus the author writes in his dedicatory to Leon Werth. This shows that his intention could not be clearer. The book is aimed at all grown-ups who have already forgotten the child that they once were, the child that still sleeps within them.

Saint-Exupéry was always faithful to his childhood. In all his books we come across memories of his childhood, a time of complete happiness and innocence.

The plot of *The Little Prince* is very simple. The little prince lives on a tiny asteroid, and he shares it with a whimsical flower and three volcanoes. But he has "problems" with the flower and feels lonely. Until one day he decides to leave the planet and look for a friend. While he looks for friendship he travels over several planets inhabited successively by a king, a conceited man, a tippler, a business man, a lamp lighter, a geographer. The approach to "important matters" of the "grown-ups" leaves him perplexed, and throws him into confusion. As he travels on, he arrives at the planet Earth, but he feels lonelier than ever in its hugeness and emptiness. A snake introduces him to a pessimistic vision of men and how little one can expect of them. The fox does not contribute to better his opinions, but teaches him how to make friends: one has to set up ties, one has to let oneself be "tamed". At the end he makes him a present of his secret: "Only with the heart can one see fully. Essential matters are invisible to the eyes." Suddenly the little prince realizes that he has been "tamed" by a flower, and decides to go back to his planet using the quick means put at his disposal by the snake. It is then that he meets the pilot who also was suffering from loneliness, and as the little prince disappears, the man finds a friend...

Despite its apparent simplicity, *The Little Prince* establishes the question mark which conditions our existence. It is a total change of values. To the question about essential matters in life, the answer is surprising and disquieting. All that men consider serious and important is small matter and without sense in the eyes of the little prince, whereas all that men consider unimportant is in fact the reason of existence for the little prince. His ironical judgement about the earth cannot be more eloquent: "The earth is not just an ordinary planet! One can count there one hundred and eleven kings (not forgetting, of course, the Negro kings among them), seven thousand geographers, nine hundred thousand businessmen, seven million five hundred thousand tipplers, three hundred and eleven million conceited men, that is to say, about two thousand million grown-ups."

In order to get out of the emptiness that surrounds men in solitude, one has to resort to friendship, love, one has to resort to oneself. The idea is not new. It had been displayed in almost all of his preceding works. Therefore, contrary to what it might seem, *The Little Prince* is not an unusual book. It is like the last movement in the symphony of his work in which all the foregoing themes are brought together schematically. In the end we realize that the charming "little prince" is nothing else but the "duplicate" of Saint-Exupéry, it is the child living inside him that stirs him and guides him, the child that wakes up in the crucial moments of his life and prevents him from taking stupid decisions like many a "grown up" who believe only in numbers, in demonstrations, in the seriousness of logic, more than in the seriousness of the heart.

In short one might say that *The Little Prince* is a quiet meditation about the solitude of man -often a result of his conceit- and about friendship, the only elixir capable of enriching human life and of re-establishing lost relationships among men.

### **"I do not care if I die in the war..."**

In 1942 the Americans decide to take part in the war, and on the 6th of November they disembark in North Africa.

After publishing *The Little Prince*, Saint-Exupéry goes to Algiers in order to join his 2/33 team, at that time under the command of the Americans. He joins them in May 1943. The Americans equipped the team 2/33 with a new type of aircraft, the "Lightning P.38" which reached speeds of up to seven hundred kilometers per hour.

The age limit to pilot this new type of aircraft was thirty-five. Saint-Exupéry at forty-three, and with a stiff shoulder, realizes that he is excluded from piloting that aircraft. Nevertheless, thanks to influences, he obtains permission to do so after a strict seven-week training course.

In June he is promoted to commander. On the 21st of July he flies out on his first mission over the Rhone and Provence. Ten days later he carries out a second mission but a faulty landing serves as a pretext to the American command to remind him that his age and physical condition are a handicap for piloting the "Lightning P.38". Saint-Exupéry is withdrawn from the 2/33 team.

During eight months he uses all his powers, contacts people who might use their influence in his favour, and goes through times of depression and discouragement. Despite all this, his literary production bears fruit. He goes on writing his book *The Wisdom of the Sands*, started in 1936 and published posthumously.

Finally, Colonel Chassin, who had known Saint-Exupéry for several years, manages to convince the American general Eaker to let Saint-Exupéry rejoin the 2/33 team, at that time in Sardinia. Again he is accepted under the condition not to fly out on more than five war missions.

The five missions become eight because he always volunteers for any mission. On the 31 of July 1944, at a quarter to nine in the morning, he takes off on his number nine mission to photograph the Grenoble and Annecy areas. At half past one he has still not come back when he has only one hour's petrol left. At half past two his companions suspect the worst.

The aircraft and the body of Saint-Exupéry, like the little prince's in the desert, were not found on the earth. Maybe he travelled to asteroid B 612 to join his little prince, silently, leaving no trace or, at the most, leaving behind a stream of stars.

A letter was found in his room addressed to General X, written shortly before:

"I do not care if I die in the war or if I get in a rage because of these flying torpedo's which have nothing to do with actual flying, and which change the pilot into an accountant by means of indicators and switches. But if I come back alive from this ungrateful but necessary "job", there will be only one question for me: What can one say to mankind? What does one have to say to mankind?"

JOELLE EYHERAMONNO